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A Sample of the Lepidoptera of the British Virgin Islands

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Mr and Mrs Percy Chubb of New York most kindly invited us to visit their holiday home on Peter Island from 30th January to 5th February, 1971. The island is $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Tortola, the capital of the territory, and is shaped rather like a boomerang. Their estate forms the western one quarter of the island and their 273 acres includes the highest point 387 feet above sea level.

The island is hilly and densely wooded so that, except for a relatively small cultivated area near the house and jetty and a path cut across the saddle back, it is difficult to move except in the area of the beaches. Other parts of the island can only be reached by boat.

The British and U.S. Virgin Islands are intermingled and consist of a large number, the exact total depending on the enumerator's definition of an island, varying in size from little more than a large rock up to many square miles in area. From almost any point at least a dozen other islands can be seen. They are thought to be the surviving tops of mountain ranges which have been almost submerged and heavily abraded. Titled strata are apparent and there are numerous coral reefs.

Just south and very close to Peter Island is Norman's Island which is supposed to be the setting used by R. L. Stevenson for "Treasure Island". Just to the north is Dead Chest Island which is alleged to be the "Dead Man's Chest" of the song. It has no harbour and no fresh water.

The weather during our stay was superb, with day temperatures in the eighties Fahrenheit and nights only a few degrees cooler. Occasional showers kept the vegetation fresh, and frangipanni, hibiscus and oleander flourish.

So far as we could establish few entomologists appear to have visited the islands and we believe that it is unlikely that any collecting at all had been done on Peter Island. On our way home we learnt from a fellow passenger on the little inter-island plane that an American entomologist was studying the genetics of one of the local moths (name not known) which our informant said was such a weak flier that it was unable to cross the sea between the islands and had consequently developed a number of distinct races. We wondered whether this was a species with an apterous female, but could obtain no more information.

Mrs Chubb very kindly replaced the normal yellow electric bulb on the patio by an ordinary tungsten bulb and this attracted many of the moths which we recorded.

Through the kindness of Mr Rowan Roy of Tortola, we were able to spend an afternoon in an excellent area of that island and he caught for us a number of moths which were attracted by his house lights during our stay. He also showed us a magnificent collection of local shells which he had built up over the years.

Birds are very numerous on Peter Island and the bay below the house was the hunting ground for a large number of pelicans and boobies who were enjoying a splendid diet of fresh fish amongst the myriad shoals which were so clearly visible in the water.

Near the house two species of humming bird were constantly visiting the hibiscus and other flowers.

The island has no poisonous snakes, no large wild animals and apart from a few gnats and mosquitoes the only unfriendly things we saw were a scorpion, some paper wasps (the local legend says of these that one species stings only on Fridays and the other all the time) and, of course, every conceivable variety of thorn and prickly, not excluding the bottom of the sea with its crop of graceful, but painful, black sea urchins.

We recorded 22 species of butterfly, a list of which with brief comments on some, follows. Identification of the moths particularly the smaller ones, presents a good deal of difficulty. However we were delighted to find that the British Museum was glad to add quite a large proportion of our catch to the National Collection.

A moth which is sometimes very abundant, but which was not in evidence during our visit, is the large Hawk Moth *Pseudosphinx tetrio* L. whose great and conspicuous larvae almost defoliate the frangipanni trees *Plumiera rubra* and *P. alba*. It is common enough to be a pest. The same remark applies to a red and yellow larva (perhaps that of a big skipper) which does considerable damage to a garden lily. We saw a few of them and obvious evidence of their depredations.

One rather eerie experience when walking amongst undergrowth near the beaches is to stand still for a few seconds when a rustling sound grows louder and louder as the hermit

land crabs, who withdraw into their shells at the noise of one's approach, begin to stretch their legs and start on their endless search for food or new shells of a more comfortable size.

To anyone fortunate enough to be able to visit this area we can only say that, whatever your interests, you will find your stay a constant delight.

Our sincere thanks are due to Baron de Worms and the officials of the British Museum (Natural History) for most invaluable help in identification.

RHOPALOCERA

- Heliconius charitonius* L. The commonest butterfly in shady areas. Sometimes upwards of a dozen resting on a single bush. The yellow and black stripes make them surprisingly elusive. Great variation in size.
- Phoebis eubule* L. A few in the northern part of the island only.
- Agriades vanillae* L. A beautiful, silver spotted fritillary. Plentiful in cleared areas. A very graceful flight.
- Didonis biblis* L. Few seen and all worn.
- Junonia lavinia* L. Very few.
- Eurema lisa* Bois & Leconte. Only one, northernmost point of island.
- Appius drusilla* Cr. The only white we saw. Fairly numerous but usually well out of reach. Males and females very different.
- Dryas julia* Fab. Two seen on Tortola.
- Thecla bubastus* Cr. Only one very worn.
- Thecla acis* Drury. Extremely abundant in a few very confined spots near acacia bushes.
- Thecla columella* Fab. Few seen.
- Hemiargus thomasi* Clench. A large, well marked blue. Only 3 in the same spot on different days.
- Hemiargus hanno* Stoll. Very scarce and local.
- Leptotes cassius* Cr s.sp. Numerous.
- chadwickii*
- Urbanus dorantes* Stoll. A large tailed skipper. Quite common. A very fast flier.
- Urbanus proteus* L. A large skipper without tails. Very plentiful especially on Tortola where it swarmed in the area of a slave graveyard where water erosion has exposed

- bones. This species always seems to rest on the underside of a leaf.
Occasional but widely spread.
- Megasias tripunctatus*
Latreille
Pyrgus oileus L. A "black and white" skipper with blue shading. Very common in the hottest places.
- Pyrgus communais*
Grote A black and white skipper. Fairly numerous.
- Choranthus vitellius* Fab. A small skipper. Very few seen.
- Polites otho* Smith A very small skipper. Only one near house.
- Polygonus leo* Guelin An orange and black skipper, quite numerous.

HETEROCERA

- Acratodes noctuata* Guen.
Aerolophus sp.
Anticarsia gemmatalis Hub.
Argyria sp near *pusillalis* Hub.
Ascalapha odorata L. One very worn specimen of this huge noctuid to the patio light.
- Azeta versicolor* Fab.
Bendis cinerea Butler
Bendis formularis Hub.
Calidota form of *strigosa* Fab.
Caularis undulans Walker
Composia credula Fab.
Desmia internicalis Guen. ? s.sp. nov.
Desmia sp. near *ufues* Cram.
Diaphania hyalinata L.
Diaphania nitidalis Cram.
Dishogama redtenbacheri Lederer
Drepanodes santiago Guen.
Ecapatheria icasia gualdulpensis Ob.
Epicasia cerata Fab.
Erastria decrepetaria Hub.
Ereta vittata Fab.
Ethmia confusella Wlk.
Eublemma cinnamonnea H-Sch.
Gerespa contorta Guen.
Gerespa familia Guen.
Herpetogramma phaecoapteralis Guen.
Lamprosema indicata Fab.
Lobocleta sp. near *borunta* Schaus.
Murgisca sp near *cervinalis* Wlk. ? sp. nov.
Mythimna polita Wlk.
Paectes obrotunda Guen.
Perigea albigera Guen.
Phurys crucis Fab.
Pilocrosis lauralis Wlk.

- Pilocrosis* sp. near *gastralis* Guen.
Pionia seriopunctalis Hampson.
Pionia sp.
Prodenia ornithogalli Guen.
Protambulix strigilis L. One specimen of this large hawk on Tortola.
Racheospila herbaria Fab.
 ?*Racheospila isolata* Warren ? sp. nov.
Radata cubalis Schaus
Salobrena rubiginea Hampson
Sphacelodes vulneraria Hub.
Sylecta erecata Cram.
Sylepta helcitalis Wlk.
Sylepta internitalis Guen.
Sylepta sp. near *gordialis* Guen.
Synclera jarbusalis Wlk.
Trichoptilus congrualis Wlk. (the only "plume" seen).
Uthethesia ornatrix L.
Xyleutes jamaicensis Schaus.
Xyleutes punctifer Hampson
Xylophanes pluto Fab. A fine hawk moth. One only on Tortola.
Zamagiria sp.

It is interesting to speculate on the results if an M.V. light were used. The low powered tungsten bulb on the patio some distance from the uncultivated area attracted a hundred or more moths in a few hours each night. Electricity for the house is supplied by generator.

Other orders

There are no rivers or permanent fresh water ponds on Peter Island, but near the highest point we saw a few dragon flies which may have bred in casual water in tree stumps or decaying cacti.

Obviously there are many species of *Hymemoptera*. The most interesting species which we saw was one specimen of *Pepsis rubra* Drury. This extraordinary wasp, known as the tarantula hawk, has the head of a wasp, the legs of a beetle and a large very hard black body. In flight the bright red wings give the appearance of a moth. Its main food is stated to be spiders, which are very abundant on the island, so that it was, perhaps, only justice that, when we disturbed the specimen from a sage bush, it flew away at great speed and would certainly have escaped had it not become entangled in a tough spider's web for long enough for us to reach it. The males are smaller with blue-blackwings.